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SUBJECT: TOPOLANEK SURVIVES ODS CONGRESS

Classified By: CDA Mary Thompson-Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Despite calls from some party leaders for the center-right Civic Democrat Party (ODS) platform congress to also include a vote on Mirek Topolaneck's (age 53) leadership of the party, Topolaneck was able to vanquish his detractors (for now) and retain the party chairmanship. There were also calls to have an election congress early next year, but this too will not happen. Although Topolaneck retained his leadership of the party, the ODS delegates rejected his proposed party platform, called Vision 2020, citing its hasty production and limited input from party members. Topolaneck may still be ODS's leader, but the general consensus is that he is weak. Topolaneck said that he will step down if ODS loses the May 2010 parliamentary elections. This is precisely what many party leaders are expecting and maybe secretly hoping for. A photo on the front page of a leading daily newspaper showed one of ODS's regional party bosses with a fistful of 1,000 CZK notes lavishing wine on the party faithful. This says much about ODS's problem - no clear vision or platform for the voters to believe in, and a perception that ODS politicians are acting for personal profit. End Summary.

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An Election Versus Platform Congress  
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¶2. (SBU) The Civic Democrats (ODS) held their party congress on November 21 - 22 in Prague at the same location as last year's. While the venue was the same, the mood was not. Last year, Mirek Topolaneck (age 53) defeated Pavel Bem (284 to 162 votes) to retain the Chairmanship of the ODS party. His victory spurred President Vaclav Klaus to leave the ODS party.

¶3. (SBU) This year's congress was to be strictly about the party's platform. However, party leaders have grown increasingly impatient over Topolaneck's leadership of the party and the direction he is leading it. Several leaders called for a vote of confidence on Topolaneck via a secret ballot. Petr Gandalovic, an ODS founding member and Vice Chairman of the party, one of Topolaneck's staunchest critics, was poised to run for the party leadership. Miroslava Nemcova (a Member of Parliament) and Pavel Bem (the Lord Mayor of Prague) also publicly advocated a vote of confidence and sought to vie for the party's leadership. The party members voted on this proposal at the beginning of the conference, and the proposal was defeated by a vote of 243 against and 189 for. However, this was not a secret ballot, and that may well have affected the voting.

¶4. (C) At any point of the conference, the delegates could have put forth a proposal to have another election congress to elect new leaders. Topolaneck has said publicly that he would consider such a congress a vote of no-confidence in him and that he would resign if such a congress were to be scheduled. The ODS International Secretary told poloff that if such a vote were to happen, it would most likely happen at the end of the congress when many delegates loyal to Topolaneck would have already left. The congress ended and

the vote on an election congress never happened. It now appears that Topolanek will lead the party into the parliamentary elections in May 2010.

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The Vision Thing  
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15. (SBU) Topolanek presented his proposed party platform for the next ten years - Vision 2020. The party delegates rejected the plan, however, because it was hastily prepared and the authors of the plan were strictly from Topolanek's inner circle. Delegates felt broader inclusion in the preparation of the plan was necessary. Gandalovic was the most openly critical of Topolanek during the congress, citing poor preparation of the Vision 2020 document as an example of Topolanek's poor leadership, as well as Topolanek's poor communication with party members. The party decided to have an "ideological" conference early next year to decide on the platform and vision for the party.

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Voices Heard  
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16. (SBU) As with any congress, speeches prevailed. What differentiated the ODS congress was the level of dissatisfaction with the party. Clearly Petr Gandalovic and Miroslava Nemcova (both spoke) are dissatisfied with leadership of the party and would have preferred a vote. But other prominent voices also echoed this sentiment, and some were not even members of the party. Petr Bendl, Ivan Langer

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and Petr Necas (all Vice Chairmen of the party) spoke of the "bad atmosphere" in the party, but stressed the need to prepare for the elections.

17. (C) President Vaclav Klaus, who founded ODS in 1991 and left the party in December 2008 because of his dislike of Topolanek, sent a letter (read, ironically enough, by Topolanek) stating that ODS should be seeking members who are public service oriented and not using politics to fulfill "their private interests." Klaus also noted that ODS could lose voters to extremist parties if they do not offer practical solutions to current problems, as these voters would be susceptible to the "easy, radical and undemocratic solutions" offered by extremist parties.

18. (C) Karel Schwarzenberg, the TOP 09 party leader, also addressed the congress and talked about previous cooperation among the centrist parties (Christian Democrats and the Greens). Schwarzenberg said that "this combination is possible and beneficial in the future as well." But Schwarzenberg went on to warn ODS to "stop internal quarreling" and "acting for personal profit." Even though ODS's internal problems favor his party TOP 09, Schwarzenberg explained that a "strong democratic right-of-center party is needed for the country's democratic development."

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Topolanek: Win or Resign  
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19. (C) Topolanek told delegate members that changing leadership ahead of the May 2010 parliamentary elections would be "a road to hell" (the same words he used to describe President Obama's economic policies -- just before the President visited Prague in April). Topolanek argued this would "pave the way" to power for Jiri Paroubek and the Social Democrats (CSSD) as well as the rival right-wing party TOP 09. Party delegates, perhaps begrudgingly, accepted this assessment and agreed that it was too risky to change leadership before the parliamentary elections next year. Topolanek also said that if ODS does not win the parliamentary elections in May 2010, he will resign the party

chairmanship. It is certain that the party members will hold him to his pledge.

¶10. (C) But who would succeed Topolanek? While Gandalovic, Nemcova and Bem all would like to head the party, few believe that any of them have the star power necessary to lead. The party seems to lack anyone who could step in and fill Topolanek's void. Bendl, Langer and Necas could also step up as Chairman, but they too lack the "stuff" that made Topolanek, when at his best, a popular and effective leader.

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ODS Needs New Image, Clear Message  
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¶11. (C) Comment: One thing always said about Mirek Topolanek is that he loves a fight. He is in a big one now. Before this congress, Topolanek said that he would consider approval of his Vision 2020 program a vote of confidence. Even after his "Vision" was not approved and he was bludgeoned with heavy criticism, he later said he considered the congress a "confirmation of his mandate." This was an optimistic assessment, but probably the best Topolanek could hope for after a string of setbacks: the collapse of his government in March; his rash resignation from the Chamber of Deputies following the scuttling of November's early elections; and this past summer's scandals involving him and business leaders and lobbyists. Topolanek is tough, scrappy and charismatic, but now he is weak, vulnerable and erratic. He will undoubtedly lead the party to the parliamentary elections in May 2010, but the polls consistently put ODS second behind CSSD and most analysts believe that CSSD will come out slightly ahead. Insiders at the congress said that party members are happy to let Topolanek lose in May, and are probably secretly wanting it, as this will ensure his rapid departure.

¶12. (C) However, it still does not solve the party's fundamental problems: lack of clear vision and strong leaders. If ODS wants to win in May, it will need about 35 percent of the vote. To accomplish this, it will need to attract more centrist voters. Without a better message -- more of "what the government can do for you", as opposed to "cut taxes and be afraid of Russia" -- ODS will not attract the voters it needs in order to win in May. Moreover, there seems to be no viable candidate, and ODS is widely perceived as promoting corrupt, self-enriching politicians. The cover story of a leading daily newspaper included a photo of an ODS party "godfather" with a fistful of 1,000 CZK notes (equivalent to USD 50s) lavishing expensive wine on and shoring up support from party loyalists only serve to cement

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an image that ODS can not afford to have. End Comment.  
Thompson-Jones